E-books: what interest(s) in 2012 for life sciences' library users at the University of Liège, Belgium?

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Abstract

Currently more than 60,000 electronic books are available in the University of Liege (Belgium) but surprisingly, recent usage statistics of e-books purchased demonstrated relatively poor consultation rates. An online user survey was conducted in March 2012 to analyse the reasons for this. The results convinced the librarians that they were in a position to remove most of the barriers and drawbacks reported by users and make a dramatic rise in e-book usage.

Key words: book selection; library collection development; library surveys; information literacy.

Introduction

For about 10 years, print journals have been progressively replaced by electronic journals in academic libraries and this change has been readily embraced by users. Indeed, e-book supply is becoming increasingly important and currently more than 60,000 electronic books are available in the University of Liege (Belgium), with more than 13,000 for the disciplines covered by the Life Sciences Library. Surprisingly, recent usage statistics of e-books purchased showed relatively poor consultation rates. The aim was to analyse this situation by performing a survey whose main objectives were:

- to investigate usage and attitudes towards e-books;
- to identify what were the obstacles perceived by users;
- to identify how the library could facilitate e-books usage.

Survey methods

An online user survey was conducted in March 2012. About 8000 members of the faculties of Medicine, Veterinary Medicine, Psychology and Science Education received an invitation to participate by mail. A unique reminder was sent after 2 weeks. Participation was anonymous and voluntary and no incentive for completing the survey was offered to the participants. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first one was the same for all participants and comprised 13 questions in order to characterize the respondent (gender, age, degree and faculty...), and to know their information-seeking behavior and comfort level regarding computer use. The second part contained different questions depending on whether or not the user consulted books or e-books. Answering all of the survey took 10 minutes maximum. The questionnaire was built so that some questions did not necessarily require a response while other questions sought several answers.

Results

1140 questionnaires were returned (14% participation rate). Respondents were from the following users'categories: bachelor or master students (75%), PhD students (6%) and university staff members (19%).

General profile of respondents

Questions were asked in order to know the habits of scientific information needs:

- the large majority of respondents declared they had searched for scientific information regularly: 32%, every day and 49%, at least once a week;
- however, their perceptions about their skill level to search for pertinent information were mitigated : 6.5 on a scale ranging from 1 to 10;
- only 68% of respondents used bibliographic databases to look for scientific information while 87% of them turned to generalist search engines such as Google. 57% referred to their personal library and 41% used books from the academic library;
- preference for the electronic version of scientific journals was high (78%).

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The comfort level of the respondents regarding the use of computers is high:

- all of them had access to a computer and internet;
- one third owned a smart phone;
- it is interesting to observe that dedicated devices such as tablets or e-readers were not so successful yet;
- respondents spend an average of two and a half hours on a computer every day.

Two sub-populations were considered for the following analysis according to whether people were using or not using scientific e-books.

Characteristics of the non-user population (14%)
Three main reasons were advanced for not consulting e-books: discomfort of reading on the screen (82%); preference for paper (59%); ignorance of e-books' availability (40%).

These barriers reflect the poor advertising by the library of the available e-books in the institution (51%), and the difficulties encountered in using the library catalog (47%). The fact of not having a computer or Internet connection at their disposal was not mentioned as a barrier. Suggested measures to facilitate the use of e-books were to provide a better description of e-books content (44%) and to inform users about the potentialities of this type of electronic resources (56%). The possession of a tablet or an e-reader enabling a more comfortable reading would also be of interest for 42% the respondents. Nevertheless, they were aware of advantages such as the "anywhere anytime" access (60%) or the power of full-text search (58%).

Characteristics of e-books users (86%)
Overall average usage was in the order of one or two consultations a month. When the choice was possible between print or electronic versions, the preference was for the electronic one (77%). However, importantly, the choice of a book depended on its content and not the format in which it was proposed (73%). Satisfaction in using scientific e-books was nevertheless mitigated (5.8 on a scale ranging from 1 to 10). Restricted consultation was the major reported criticism (64%). Other frequently cited drawbacks were: the eyestrain generated by reading on a screen (61%) and the difficulty of finding an e-book corresponding to one's needs (46%). Respondents reported also rather frequent difficulties in using the catalog to find e-books of interest.

The survey ended by common questions addressing users' perception of the future. 60% of them believed that e-books will never completely replace print versions, and that both types will continue to coexist. Nevertheless, the remaining 40% of participants are convinced that the electronic version will definitively replace print version in short- to middle-term (5 to 15 years). Only 9% considered the shift from paper to electronic as totally positive; 27% were clearly against. The others (64%) report mixed feelings on the matter.

Discussion
The survey launched in March 2012 at the University of Liège with the users of the Life Sciences Library indicates that they were well informed of the existence of scientific e-books. The majority of the respondents (75%) were bachelor's and master's students in the fields of medicine, veterinary medicine, psychology and education sciences. The other participants (25%) were PHD students, researchers and other faculty members. A general and reassuring observation was that it did not seem to be any insuperable obstacle for any of the surveyed groups to access e-books. Almost 100% of the respondents had a computer at their disposal, not only on the campus but also at home. Tablets, smart phones and other e-readers were still infrequent in this population, but decreasing costs will quickly make these devices affordable for a majority of customers. As in the populations studied by Dewan (1), the participants of this present survey appreciated consulting documents online without any spatial or temporal constraints and escaping the stress related to loan procedures (bringing books back in time or incurring fines). In spite of these positive considerations, users' satisfaction about e-books remained mitigated (5.8/10).

The moderate success of e-books might be explained by physical, technical and personal reasons that were expected and have already been described by others. If the survey did not reveal any new data, it offered the avantage of characterising precisely the population of the Liège library users. Moreover, the measures and observations corroborated the recent analysis carried out at the University of Pittsburgh (2). At this stage of analysis, the librarians are convinced that they are in a position to remove most of the barriers and drawbacks reported by users. Several actions could easily be undertaken to facilitate e-books usage which rely on user education and training on matters such as catalog searching or understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the different strategies that are commonly adopted to access scientific information. In particular, users should be aware that the majority of e-books are

not free, but only available if purchased by academic institutions. As a consequence, they should learn how to use a library catalog efficiently to locate books of interest instead of turning to Google Scholar or any kind of generalist search engines. The Life Sciences Library has a long experience of user education and their staff are confident that they can easily do what is necessary at this level. Furthermore, in order to increase awareness about e-books availability for users coming in the library, it is possible that QR codes allowing direct access to the online catalog would be useful. QR codes could lead users directly to records of all available books (print and/or electronic) for a specific classification (Figure 1). Then gradually users will become familiar with the coexistence of the two options.

Fig. 1. *QR code offers access to notices of available books in the institution's catalog, for the NLM classification "cardiology".*

Unfortunately, all the means to enhance e-books usage are not as easy to implement. The librarians have encountered other obstacles that are related to both acquisition policies at the university level and commercial practices of the editors. A major pitfall is the acquisition by local managers of large bulk packages of e-books offered by e-editors at reduced prices. Two problems arise from these practices: the impossibility for the librarians to process thousands of e-books in a reasonable period of time and the risk of purchasing resources unsuited to users' needs.

We all know that the efficacy and the precision of catalog searching depend on the quality of the indexing of the recorded documents. It is technically easy to import a large batch of bibliographic references into a catalog but the indexing that should be performed next by librarians is a time-consuming process that requires time, knowledge, skills and careful analysis of e-books scientific contents. An alternative approach would be to entrust the indexing task to the editors themselves but experience has shown that the results are very poor quality.

Price is the first argument used at present to guide e-books acquisition. The content of the packages is decided on the editors' part only and cannot be customized by the librarians according to users' needs. On the one hand, the librarians feel that the textbooks that are necessary for bachelor and master students are underrepresented in the special packages, or lost among the highly specialized books. On the other hand, many of these specialized books are not directly useful for the researchers, even if their interest and their scientific quality are not in doubt. Simply, they cover research fields that are not developed in our university.

For all these reasons, the recommendation is to apply to e-books the same selection criteria as those that have been used until now for print monographs. Limited and targeted choices should prevail over quantity. Reduced bulk prices should not interfere in the decision making. Instead, the acquisitions should be tailored to the exact needs of all the categories of end users. If the number of books is limited, the librarians will be able to process them carefully at the catalog level and the end-users will be given good working conditions to exploit this wealth of information.

A side effect of the disappearance of printed books will be the release of space inside the libraries. Then, another challenge for the librarians will be to preserve the physical identity of the library while promoting the learning activities and the scientific thinking. We believe that if we can put all these measures in place, the e-books will soon be a tool of choice in Life Sciences libraries. As always, user education and dialogue among all the stakeholders will be the keys to success.

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